



University of Connecticut
OpenCommons@UConn

NERA Conference Proceedings 2010

Northeastern Educational Research Association
(NERA) Annual Conference

Fall 10-20-2010

Querying The Place and Shape of Ethics in Education: Models and Methods

Victoria Nunez
vnunez@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/nera_2010



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nunez, Victoria, "Querying The Place and Shape of Ethics in Education: Models and Methods" (2010). *NERA Conference Proceedings 2010*. 21.

https://opencommons.uconn.edu/nera_2010/21

Do children who attend schools exclusively for the disabled need to learn about ethics? Are they not most commonly the targets of painful slurs, teasing, and bullying in school? What leads the teased to become the teaser? Can we educate all children and youth to create a kinder and gentler school environment, one that is more inclusive of all youth? Will engaging children in ethics education early in their lives lead to more ethical behavior when the consequences are greater, later in life?

In responding to these types of questions, speakers in this symposium, “Ethics Across the Curriculum,” propose a renewed effort to create a place for ethics in educational curricula across the P-12 curriculum in the United States. A number of scholars have explored the idea of integrating ethics and other forms of philosophical thinking into the P-12 curriculum both locally and globally over the last four decades.¹ Yet the local movements to incorporate ethics into education have stalled and need to be reinvigorated. This point is argued from the perspective of a science teacher educator experienced in the academic movement Philosophy for Children, a researcher looking at attitudes among in-service and preservice science teachers, a technology teacher educator, an educator working with preprofessional engineering students, and an educator working with a social-emotional curriculum for students in a school for students with disabilities.

¹ The International Association for Philosophy of Children (IAPC) began in 1974 to disseminate a curriculum it had developed around the United States. In 1979 the founders of this movement initiated an international journal, *Thinking, The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, published from Montclair State University in New Jersey. Over time, the IAPC received funding through the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate its work in the U.S. (Lipman, n.d.). This work is less active in the present. A sign of this movement’s international momentum was the founding in 1985 of the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) in Copenhagen. The movement to incorporate philosophy into the P-12 curriculum is more active internationally than in the U.S. today. One form of evidence is that *Thinking, The Journal of Philosophy for Children* has an editorial board composed completely of scholars from outside North America. The journal’s editorial board has announced that it will cease publication in 2011.

My perspective as the discussant is shaped by my study and teaching of feminist care ethics (Noddings, 2005) and the way this notion of caring has been applied by critical Latino/a studies researchers in the study of Latino/a urban education (Valenzuela, 1999; De Jesus, 2003; De Jesus & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006). In my response to these papers I propose that we advance our discussion by adding the lens offered by critical educational studies which can move us toward a discussion of a *critical* ethics for children, youth and educators.

Parallel Movements: Doing Philosophy and Doing Science With Kids

Dr. Novemsky, a science education expert, argues that the dominant practices within the western tradition of ethics, a branch of philosophy, can lead educators and philosophers in the present to believe that children have to learn *about a field* before they can actively *engage* in that field. For example, children must learn *about* philosophy before they can *do philosophy*. They must have the cognitive capacity to learn *about ethics* before they can consider ethical conundrums. To contradict this idea, she cites the Philosophy for Children movement initiated by the New Jersey-born philosopher Matthew Lipman in the 1970s. In observing his child's nursery school, Lipman became convinced that children as young as toddlers develop a sense of a moral world and can begin to develop their philosophical and ethical thinking. Dr. Novemsky argues that leading students to thinking and talking about ethics is similar to leading them to think and talk about science. Science has gone through a similar revision and science educators routinely train teachers to work with children from p-12 to "do science." The habits of mind developed through philosophy for children are quite similar to those developed through communities of inquiry and are useful across the P-12 curriculum in that they

emphasize asking large over-arching questions, and moving from personalized examples and dilemmas to broader examples.

This must be somebody else's job

Echoing Dr. Novemsky's point about the cognitive capacity that young children have for philosophical thinking, Dr. Rozentsvit cites neuroscientific research that toddlers and young children do have the capacity for morality such as discerning the difference between good and bad behavior. Dr. Rozentsvit's introduction of neuroscientific research is resonant of Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental model of moral development.

Dr. Rozentsvit's primary purpose, however, is to present the findings of her research in which she queried in-service and preservice science teachers about the role of ethics in science education. Her findings point to a common phenomenon among educators, the belief that a particular area of knowledge or skill is important but, "it must be someone else's job to teach it." In Dr. Rozentsvit's research, the majority of science educators agreed upon the importance of teaching ethics and the connection between scientific inquiry and the social context, however, they also expressed that it must be some other teacher's responsibility to cover these topics, for example, social studies teachers. If we accept ethics as a discrete discipline that belongs more to the humanities, a central concern of philosophy, as opposed to a practice that is integral to all disciplines, then the line of thinking "this must be somebody else's job" is valid. However, if we position ethics and the development of ethical thinking as a contextual part of all disciplinary work, then we can see the possibility for ethics across the curriculum. Dr. Rozentsvit's finding that the graduate student science teachers see ethics and social

responsibility as part of the social studies curriculum points to the college level training of these teachers. Teaching education faculty across the disciplines need to create the curricular space for ethical discussions and discussions of socially responsible practice if we hope to promote the movement of ethics for children.

From the mother test to the other test

In developing habits of mind that address ethics, Dr. Lillienthal shared a model of several thought experiments he developed for engineering students. To address just one of these tests, what he refers to the mother test, I want to suggest a revision to this test and refer to it as “the other test.” Dr. Lillienthal’s test for engineers who will build and develop new structures and products in our society, is that they should ask themselves: is this new structure good enough for my mother? The metaphor of the mother suggests that students will be able to easily imagine the impact of innovations on the society in which it is installed because it is the mother’s society. The “other test” suggests that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the impact of new structures because they will be implemented in distant places, in unfamiliar geography, among people whose culture is quite different and amidst social conditions perhaps radically different from that of the engineer.

The other test introduces the concept of alterity, unfamiliarity, and an inability to imagine not based on an unwillingness, but on a lack of knowledge and experience. The implication of adding “the other test” is that the professional, whether engineer, scientist, psychologist, or writing teacher, may have no emotional connection to the recipient of the service. There is no history of caring, reciprocity or of equality. How will our actions be influenced when we consider that we will carry out our professional responsibilities

among people about whom we may know little, and who live in houses, family structures and social systems that may be foreign to us? The other test demands research into the social context of the work.

By introducing the concept of alterity, I suggest that this discussion should move from a discussion of ethics to a discussion of critical ethics, or one that takes into account positionality: the social identity of the ethical thinker and the relations of power in which she or he lives. Is cyber bullying the same whether the victim is straight or gay? Are the youth and adults who become aware of cyber bullying more likely or less likely to take action if the victim is gay? Are the perpetrators of harassment more likely to prey on individuals who hold low power positions in our society? A critical perspective will lead the student to reflect on their own social position in society, as either a dominant or non-dominant group member, and the power they hold in any particular situation as they consider the ethical dimensions of a dilemma.

Addressing The Social Context of Technology Education

Dr. Rosenfeld points out that the key problem in the field of technology education is that we teach technology but not necessarily the ethical use of technology. Dr. Rosenfeld's paper raises the question of how we protect the vulnerable, in some cases from other vulnerable and low power people in our society. What exactly should youth learn about the ethical use of technology, when and from whom?

Dr. Rosenfeld reminds us of the treacherous pitfalls in the use of technology in society today, most pointedly in situations of cyber bullying. The college-age victim of a recent cyber bullying incident at Rutgers University, Tyler Clementi, may have felt victimized to a greater extent because he was gay. He may have felt like the stakes were

higher as a gay man who was about to be humiliated over the internet by his peers, largely to an audience of his straight peers. If technology teachers are moved to respond to this call to educate students on the ethics of the use of technology, then, they must address with their students the ways in which non-dominant youth in our society understand their lives, particularly if they have a long and deep history of being the victim of bullying. Henry Giroux argues this point in the following way:

Addressing the problems that many youth currently face suggests that rigorous education work needs to respond to the dilemmas of the outside world by focusing on how young people make sense of their experiences and possibilities for decision making within the structures of everyday life. (2001, p. xxvii)

All youth must see the many possibilities for decision making and must exercise those skills in low stakes situations, in classrooms, before we can hope that they will reliably exercise ethical decision making in high stakes conflicts.

The Feminist Contribution to Critical Ethics for Children and Youth

My background as a feminist, has led me to incorporate a branch of ethical discourse referred to as feminist care ethics into the teacher education classes I lead. This ethical perspective is one defined by several women educational theorists, initially Nel Noddings (2005). Noddings work has offered a framework for educational researchers to consider the currency of caring in schools. Sociologist Angela Valenzuela (1999) became aware of this currency while conducting ethnographic research in a low performing segregated Houston high school. In her interviews with students, the youth stressed the importance of caring: the students needed to know that the teachers cared

about them before they were willing to care about the teachers' lessons. Valenzuela's findings are echoed in De Jesus's (2003) research, and research carried out by De Jesus and Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) which highlights a number of questions: how do adults express caring to students, how do students perceive their teachers' caring, and what difference do these concerns for caring make to the teaching and learning that happens in schools? These researchers of Latino/a urban education conclude that caring is a critical topic from the perspective of urban students who occupy low status positions in our society. Low income and working class Latino/a students introduced this topic to researchers independently and repeatedly in very different cultural and geographical contexts. The students were deeply concerned that mainstream educators did not appear to care sincerely about their educational well-being and this perceived lack of caring led students to feel alienated from school.

This symposium highlighted the necessity of ethics in the school curriculum for children and youth and the role teacher educators have in this project. Ethics has been referred to in a number of different ways: as social emotional learning, as socially responsible practice, and as caring. The presentations present models for accomplishing this task in a diversity of settings in which educators are implementing this work. Each author could consider reshaping their analysis by adopting a critical lens, creating a critical ethics for children, youth and the educators who work with them. This critical ethics would address relations of power, and the interrelations between dominant and subordinate communities in the society.

References

- Antrop-Gonzalez, R., De Jesus, A. (2006). Toward a Theory Of Critical Care in Urban Small School Reform: Examining Structures and Pedagogies of Caring in Two Latino Community-Based Schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19, 409-403.
- De Jesús, A. (2003). "Here it's More like your House:" The Proliferation of Authentic Caring as School Reform at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice. In Rubin, Beth & Silva, Elena (Eds.), *Critical Voices: Students Living School Reform*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- De Jesús, A., Antrop-Gonzalez, R. (2006). Instrumental Relationships and High Expectations: Exploring Critical Care in Two Latino Community-Based Schools. *Intercultural Education* 17,281-29.
- Freire, P. (1968, 1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Giroux, H. (2001). *Theory and Resistance in Education, Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Lipman, M. (n.d.). IAPC Timeline. In Montclair State University, College of Education and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://cehs.montclair.edu/academic/iapc/timeline.shtml>
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.